

Student Engagement as a Predictor of Effective Higher Educational Practices

Norzaini Azman

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

The quest for excellence in teaching and learning in higher education is a world-wide concern. Universities and colleges have responded to the challenge for higher quality in instruction by looking closely at the nature of the teaching and learning environment. It is concurred that the quality of undergraduate education largely depends on the quality of teaching provided by faculty (Kuh, 2003; Kuh and Pascarella, 2004; Pascarella, 2001). A well designed, effective, student-centred learning environment that encourages active learning and enriching experiences will typically use a rich variety of relevant and effective instructional methods. Student-centred learning environments that contribute to active learning and enriching experiences include collaborative activities, goal-driven tasks, intellectual discovery, activities that heighten thinking, activities that provide practice in learning skills, tasks of a student's own invention and appropriate use of new technology and traditional resources. The lecturers need to be willing to experiment with alternative methods and to assess their effectiveness in promoting active and enriching learning experience for their students. The aim is to use engaging teaching and learning activities that promote higher level student outcomes.

Assessment of student learning and personal development gains are necessary evidence of the quality of undergraduate education. Research in college and university student development have shown that time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities are the best predictors of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, 2001). Thus, those institutions that engage their students more fully in the variety of activities that contribute to valued outcomes of college can claim to be of higher quality in comparison with similar types of colleges and universities.

Student engagement is defined as "the student's psychological investment in and the effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newman, 1992: 17). More than just the energy to complete the task, engagement represents the psychological investment that cognitively involves students in the work they are doing.

Engagement requires both an inner quality of concentration and commitment to learning and a willingness or intention to act on the commitment. Student engagement can be viewed as a continuum for more engaged to less engaged, just as student disengagement can be plotted on a continuum. The extent of student engagement must be estimated or inferred from indicators such as the amount of participation in academic work, the intensity of their concentration, the interest and enthusiasm expressed and the care and quality shown in completing the work.

Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Pace, 1990; Pike, 2004). It is believed that the more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. Likewise, the more students practise and get feedback on their writing, analyse or solve problems, the more adept they should become (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 1993). The act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and disposition that is essential to live a productive and satisfying life after graduation. That is, students who are involved in educationally productive activities in universities are developing habits of mind that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development (Shulman, 2002).

The implication for estimating collegiate quality is clear. Those institutions that engage their students in the variety of activities that contribute to valued outcomes of college can claim to be of higher quality. In other words, the most educationally effective colleges and universities are those that are able to channel students' energies toward appropriate activities and engage them at a high level in such activities.

This new perspective on the meaning of collegiate quality demanded that researchers use student engagement measures as indicators for good educational practices. Emphasising good educational practice helps focus faculty and students on the task and activities that are associated with higher level student outcomes. Towards these ends, faculty and lecturers will need to arrange the curriculum and other aspects of the college and university experience in accordance with good practices, thereby initiating and encouraging students to put more effort in their learning. This will result in greater gains in such areas as critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, self-directed learning and responsible citizenship.

Seven Principles of Good Practice

Certain institutional practices are known to lead to high levels of student engagement (Astin, 1993; Chikering and Reisser, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The best known set of engagement indicators is the *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chikering and Gamson, 1987; 1991). These principles were empirically linked to measures of 'collegiate quality'. The principles are grounded in theories developed by proponents of experiential learning (Dewey, 1958), cognitive learning (Bruner, 1960) and adult learning (Houle, 1964). These seven principles were: 1) frequent student-faculty contacts, 2) co-operation among students in their learning efforts, 3) faculty use of active learning strategies, 4) prompt feedback to students on their performance, 5) communications of high expectations to students, 6) time spent by students on task,

and 7) respect for the diverse talents and students' ways of learning.

The first of these principles pertains to the *encouragement of student-faculty contact*. Student motivation and involvement are fostered by frequent student-faculty interaction in and out of the classroom (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). Faculty concern helps students get through difficulties so that they can keep on working. Interaction with faculty members enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans. The *encouragement of co-operation* among students is the second principle. Chickering and Gamson (1991) contend that co-operation among students heightens learning. This principle incorporates elements of collaborative teaching and learning. Working with others often increases involvement in learning and that sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpen thinking and deepen understanding. The third principle concerns the *encouragement of active learning*. Learning is increased if students actively participate in their courses by discussing and writing about course content (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). Students must be given the opportunity to talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate to past experience and apply it to daily lives.

The *provision of prompt feedback* constitutes the fourth principle of good practice. Appropriate feedback on course performance helps students assess their knowledge and skills. Students should be provided with frequent opportunities to perform and receive feedback on ways to improve their work (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). The fifth principle postulates that *time on task should be emphasised*. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and future professionals. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amount of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty.

The *communication of high expectations* is specified by the sixth principle. This principle requires that faculty not only hold students to high standards but also expect that students will meet them. The seventh principle entails *faculty respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing*. Students have different set of experiences, skills, abilities and ways of learning. Students should be provided with the opportunity to show their talent, demonstrate their skills and use their styles of learning to their best advantage (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). By taking into account students' differences, faculty are in a better position to design activities which would foster individual learning.

The seven principles of good practices have been proven to be valid and appropriate for promoting learning and personal development for all students at all types of institutions (Braxton et al. 1998; Pike, 2004; Kuh and Pascarella, 2004). Many researches have been carried out to develop instruments that consist of examples and indicators of the seven principles. The College Student

Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) developed by Pace (1990) is a research tool containing indicators that measure several of the seven principles and it is used to predict students' progress in learning. The questionnaire has been used in many studies (Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Kuh et al. 1997) and the seven indicators of good practices exhibited adequate psychometric properties as measured by students' reported gains in the CSEQ questionnaire, and that these indicators could be considered as reliable and valid indicators of student outcomes.

Friedlander, Pace and Lehman (1991) created the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ), a survey based on the seven principles which assesses the breadth and quality of effort community college students exert in attaining educational gains and development. The instrument has been used widely and findings generated from studies by Friedlander, Murrell and MacDougall (1993); Douzenis (1996); Swigart and Murrell (2001), support the use of this instrument as an assessment tool for exploring students' involvement and self-reported academic gains in the community college setting. Data from the CSSEQ provided relevant information to community colleges in addressing programmatic needs in student development as well as in providing a better understanding of students' views of their undergraduate learning environment (McClenny, 2004).

Building on the seven principles of good practices, a group of researchers from Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research developed a survey of student engagement which is intended to provide information about the extent to which colleges and universities exhibit characteristics and commitment to good practices and high quality student outcomes. The survey gathered information about classroom and non-classroom experience during preceding school year, which is used to estimate students' engagement in college. The results of the survey had been used to produce a set of national benchmarks of good educational practice that colleges and universities can use as proxy measures to identify opportunities for improving undergraduate education. (Kuh, 2001a).

Conclusion

This article purports that student engagement and aspects of the students' undergraduate experience at an institutional level can be enhanced using indicators of effective practices. How the universities realise good practice in determining the delivery of their undergraduate programmes and implementing effective practices depends largely on their administration, staff and students. To do so, they need to examine successfully proven educational practices that produce higher quality learning environments. Fifty years of research has concluded that one of the most effective undergraduate learning is based on the *Seven Principles for Good Practice* (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). As an acceptable philosophy of good teaching and learning, these principles establish fundamental guidelines for quality higher education and therefore should be used as the building blocks for success by faculty and

students. Thus, strenuous efforts are needed to systematically adopt and implement the seven principles as a focus for improving the practice of undergraduate education. For a start, a set of indicators based on the seven principles can be used to distinguish quality learning environments. A list of specific indicators of each of the seven principles can also be used to guide the students and faculty to become more analytical in assessing their roles in the educational experience.

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The author believes that university faculty are committed to strengthening the learning environment in the university and that they are committed to the teaching and learning process as well as to the students who are engaged in that process. Although we take pride in excellence in teaching, we nevertheless cannot rest on these accomplishments. It is worthy to note that increased emphasis on teaching, learning and assessment is already evident in the Malaysian Quality Framework (MQF). Nonetheless, we need to closely examine what promotes effective undergraduate education and the ways in which learning environments can be effectively created and nurtured. This way, we can gain a better understanding of what really constitutes institutional excellence in undergraduate education.

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